Time to Look Again at Young People and Politics[1]

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Political scientists need to study young people and politics again. Once a vibrant field of research, political socialization's heyday has long since past. This is unfortunate, for today's young – especially the "DotNets" – are very different from the Baby Boomers, who were the central subjects of study when political scientists engaged in original political socialization research. Several factors, including the perception that the field was too committed to the status quo, account for political socialization's decline. One need not call for resuscitation of older understandings of what political socialization entails. Nevertheless, there is a price to be paid if the discipline continues its general neglect of young people and their political attitudes and behaviors.

Political scientists should study young people's political attitudes and behavior again. If we value democracy, we need to understand what young people's disconnection from traditional political processes entails for the future.[2] Democracy demands an attentive, informed, and active public (Dahl, 1998; Galston, 2001), qualities that are hard to find among young folks today (Wattenberg, 2007).

In addition, the country's need to absorb large numbers of immigrants, many of whom retain emotional attachments to their homeland and do not learn English, provides more impetus to original research on political socialization.

"Young people" means the "DotNets," who were born in 1979 or later. Labeling and dating birth cohorts is always dicey, but I follow Cliff Zukin and his colleagues in referring to the electorate's youngest birth cohort as the "DotNets" (2006, p. 15), although my dating differs slightly from theirs; they date DotNets from 1976 on. DotNets make up a little over one-fifth of the American population (U.S. Census Bureau, 2004).

I refer to birth cohorts rather than generations for two reasons. First, one cannot be sure that the "self-identification" Karl Mannheim (1952, pp. 276-322; see also Fredrickson, 1965; Wohl, 1979) believed was a generation's essential feature exists among the DotNets. Second, as Zukin and his co-authors were aware, generations *are clear only in history's rear-view mirror*" (2006, p.15; emphasis mine).

In one sense, concern with how people learn about politics is as old as the study of public affairs. According to Robert Weissberg, "Plato and Aristotle … wrote about what is called today 'citizenship training'"

(1974, p. 11; see also Weissberg, 1976, p. 139). Other than Charles Merriam (1931), most American political scientists between 1900 and 1960 paid little attention to how people acquired political attitudes and behaviors and what that entailed for the polity (Somit & Tanenhaus, 1967). Albert Somit and Joseph Tanenhaus' survey of political science in 1963 did not mention political socialization and not because their characterization of the discipline's fields was too coarsely-grained (1964).

Things would quickly change. From the early-1960s to the early-1970s, political scientists published books, articles, and essays containing original research on young people and politics (Niemi & Sobieszek, 1977 summarized this corpus). One could also read the University of Michigan's team of voting behavior researchers' notions of partisanship as consistent with early political socialization studies (See Campbell, Converse, Miller, & Stokes, 1960; Campbell, Gurin, & Miller, 1954). Probably the three most widely cited book-length studies from the 1960s were David Easton and Jack Dennis' *Children in the Political System* (1969), Fred Greenstein's *Children and Politics* (1965), and Robert Hess and Judith Torney's *The Development of Political Attitudes in Children* (1967).

Two broad orientations emerged when political scientists began conducting research on political socialization (For useful overviews, see Dawson & Prewitt, 1969; Jaros, 1973). The first, and ultimately the more durable (Conover, 1991), focused on learning (See Hyman, 1959; Sears & Levy, 2003; Stein, 2002). Virginia Sapiro (2004, p. 3) wrote that this was the "micro-level" focus of political socialization.

The second orientation concentrated on how political systems molded children into good citizens and tended

to be grounded in systems theory (Conover, 1991). This was Sapiro's "macro-level" tradition (2004, p. 2).

Initially, the macro-level tradition found greater resonance. Early studies in this tradition produced two general findings: (1) children tended to "personalize" political objects (see especially Easton & Hess, 1962), and (2) they "idealized" political authorities (See Easton & Hess, 1961; Greenstein, 1960).[3] These findings led scholars from this tradition to assume persistence of political orientations: "socialization was likely completed by the end of elementary school; or, if not completed, at least later learning would be modest for most people . . ." (Conover, 1991, p. 127).

Greenstein (1970), Dennis (1973), and William Schonfeld (1971) documented the field's rapid growth. The American Political Science Association's fourth (1961) and fifth (1968) *Biographical Directories* highlighted political socialization's increasing popularity. In 1961, the field was not listed; when A.P.S.A. members were asked to list their first field of specialization for the fifth *Biographical Directory*, political socialization came in thirteenth out of 27 fields (Schonfeld, 1971). Moreover, as Heinz Eulau reported (1969), 84 percent of A.P.S.A. members who selected political socialization as their first field of specialization for the fifth *Biographical Directory* were born in 1930 or later. Small wonder that Greenstein would write in 1970 that "'[p]olitical socialization' is a growth stock" (p. 969).

Several things contributed to political socialization's emergence as a vibrant field of original research:

- First was the coming-of-age of the Baby Boomers, the roughly 83 million Americans born between 1946 and 1964 (See Light, 1988).

- Second, youthful protest movements agitated the American body politic from the so-called "Free Speech" movement at Berkeley in the fall of 1964 to the bombing of the physics building at the University of Wisconsin in late August, 1970 (Lipset, 1972).

- Third was ratification in 1971 of the 26th Amendment to the Constitution, which lowered the minimum legal voting age from 21 to 18 (Wattenberg, 2007).

- Finally, the rise of the Behavioral Movement reoriented research from legal-institutional factors to individual-level phenomena such as beliefs, attitudes, values, and behaviors (See, e.g., Eulau, ed., 1969). As political scientists became more interested in individual-level variables, it was natural to ask how they came to be; hence, the attention to political socialization (Greenberg, 1970a, 5).

Even during the field's heyday, there were clouds on the horizon. In 1968, for example, Dennis called attention to ten "central problem dimensions" in political socialization research. One can read Easton's (1968) essay as a shot-across-the-bow of early political socialization studies. Two years later Greenstein (1970) pointed to several "ambiguities" in political socialization studies. Many of the studies in Edward Greenberg's reader either "undermin[ed]" or "seriously qualif[ied]" early studies in the field (Greenberg, 1970a).

Political socialization research rather quickly lost its luster. Several factors contributed to political science's relative neglect of political socialization research after approximately 1970. First, with the military draft ended and the withdrawal of U.S. armed forces from Vietnam, much of the anti-war movement's steam was gone, and quiet returned to America's campuses. Second, scholars began to call attention to the theoretical flaws in much of the existing political socialization research. Recall Dennis' (1968), Easton's (1968), Greenberg's (1970a), and Greenstein's (1970) observations. In the interests of brevity, I mention only three additional critiques of political socialization research, which many judged to be devastating.

In 1971, David Marsh raised serious doubts about three of the field's key assumptions: (1) adults' political dispositions are largely the result of political socialization; (2) adults' political actions are at least partly determined by childhood learning; and (3) individuals' dispositions and behaviors affect the polity. As he noted, since the three "are closely linked any valid criticism of one assumption necessarily weakens the others" (p. 456).

Two years later, Donald Searing and his colleagues questioned "the structuring principle," the notion that "basic orientations acquired during childhood structure the later learning of specific issue beliefs" (Searing, Schwartz, and Lind, 1973, p. 415). "Our findings cast considerable doubt upon the structuring principle, and thereby, upon the theoretical relevance of much childhood research . . ." (p. 430).

Subsequently, Searing, Gerald Wright, and George Rabinowitz (1976) assessed the so-called "primacy principle," which consisted of "three assumptions about political orientations": (1) "they are learned during childhood"; (2) "this childhood learning further shapes any subsequent modifications of them"; and (3) "the scale of any such subsequent modifications is small" (p. 83). They reached three conclusions. First, *"[t]he primacy principle is basically sound but has often been overstated"* (authors' italics). Second, there is little evidence *"for the existence of historical generations"* (authors' italics). Third, *Zeitgeist* (i.e. "period") effects are more important than aging effects in accounting for changing political orientations over time (pp. 112-13).

Although their conclusions might have been different had they studied a different time-period, Searing and his co-authors asserted that "our most surprising finding is the pervasive impact of contemporary events" (p. 113). If true, that would be a serious blow to political socialization research.

Yet another factor that may have led to the field's near demise is that one genré of political socialization research seemed to some members of the profession to be too committed to a status-quo stance (see, e.g., Sigel, 1965).[4] Concern with the system-maintenance consequences of socialization was probably borrowed by political scientists from other social science disciplines (Easton, 1968).

Emphasis on the system-maintenance consequences of political socialization need not be integral to the field (See, e.g., Greenberg, 1970a). Easton, who is usually thought of as a proponent of the systems-maintenance consequence of political socialization, warned that "[t]he major drawback of a theoretical perspective that emphasizes system-maintenance is that research inspired by a concern for stability . . . must overlook a whole range of consequences that socialization has for political diversity, conflict, and change" (1968, p. 141). It is possible that one outcome of political socialization is rejection of, not acceptance of or acquiescence in, the dominant patterns of the regime. One recalls Kenneth Keniston's (1968) "red diaper" babies, i.e., children of left-wing radicals, who played important roles in the protests of the 1960s.

Other scholars pointed out that much of political socialization research was disconnected from theories of children's intellectual, moral, and social development. Timothy Cook (1985), for example, called attention to political socialization researchers' general neglect of major theorists of childhood development and learning, especially Jean Piaget and L. S. Vygotsky.

Weissberg (1976) leveled a broader critique of the field. He claimed that political socialization researchers' attempts to explain individual differences – "the EID research design" – has "yielded more promise than payoff" (p. 119). Worse, the EID design led to the neglect of important political factors, such as "the development of highly consensual norms and behaviors" (p. 124) and "the . . . tenacity of attitudes and behaviors" (p. 125). Weissberg argued that political socialization researchers should emphasize political socialization as an independent variable – "the SAIV design" – to evaluate the socialization process "in terms of (a) interest politics and (b) the requirements of normative theory" (p. 136).

Still another reason for the decline of political socialization research may have been its heavy reliance on the sample survey and paper-and-pencil questionnaires (Conover, 1991, p. 128; Cook, 1985, pp. 1080-81; Weissberg, 1976). Conover noted that methodological critiques, mostly directed at survey research, "threatened to shut down the study of childhood socialization" (1991, p. 128).

The field was also undermined when protests in the late 1960s and early 1970s –presumably undertaken by many of the same children who idealized authority figures a decade earlier – broke out.[5] According to Pamela Johnston Conover (1991, p. 127), "the events of the late sixties and early seventies involving the now college-age children of the early socialization studies seemed perversely designed to discredit the idealization thesis . . . ."

Finally, it is possible that political socialization was a fad (Peng, 1994), and like most academic fads, once it crested, original research fairly quickly waned.

By 1986, Richard Merelman rightly observed that the "halcyon period" for political socialization research "has clearly passed" (p. 279). Shortly thereafter, Conover claimed that "political socialization is in trouble, deep trouble" (1991, p. 125). She added that "[b]y 1980, the study of childhood socialization had come to a standstill" (p. 128).

The upshot of the field's virtual demise is that one seldom encounters original research devoted to young people and politics. Granted, there are studies that fit within political socialization's penumbra, such as Michael Delli Carpini's study of the 1960s birth cohort's coming-of-age (1986), Orit Ichilov's *Political Socialization, Citizenship Education, and Democracy* (1990; see also Ichilov, Ed. 1998), Stanley Moore, James Lare, and Kenneth Wagner's *The Child's Political World* (1985), Roberta Sigel and Marilyn Hoskin's *The Political Involvement of Adolescents* (1981), and more recently, Zukin and his co-authors' (2006) analysis of changing notions of citizenship in the U.S. Scholars also began to study political socialization among adults (e.g., Sigel, ed., 1989). Nevertheless, there are very few studies of Generation X, or persons born between 1965 and 1978 (see Craig & Bennett, Eds., 1997 for exceptions).

One can point to several indicators of the field's relative neglect among political scientists today. First, although political socialization merited chapters in major compendia published in the mid-1970s (Niemi, 1973; Sears, 1975), one seldom encounters similar coverage today. None of the three summaries of the discipline published under the auspices of the American Political Science Association, for example, has a chapter devoted to the topic (Finifter, Ed., 1983, 1993; Katznelson & Milner, Eds., 2002). The A.P.S.A.'s 2002 *Directory of Political Science Faculty* lists 84 "Fields of Specialization in Political Science"; political socialization is not one of them.

Sapiro (2004) provided yet another indicator of how political science now neglects political socialization. She observed that none of the top 15 political science departments were offering an undergraduate- or graduate-level course on the topic, and only the University of Wisconsin and the University of Wisconsin at Milwaukee "seem to have such a course on their books" (p. 3).[6] In short, "the discipline of political science is not providing its next generation of scholars with an opportunity for sustained study of political socialization" (Sapiro, 2004, pp. 3-4).

Political socialization studies continue to appear, of course (see, e.g., Conover, 1991; Merelman, 1986; Sapiro, 2004; Sears & Levy, 2003; Stein, 2002). Nevertheless, one cannot help but notice a certain wistfulness among some of these studies, such as a call for the field's revitalization (Merelman, 1986), or recognition that the field is different from what it was in its heyday (Conover, 1991; Sapiro, 2004; Stein, 2002). Some recent studies are mostly summaries of past studies, offering little new evidence (Conover, 1991; Sapiro, 2004).

This has occurred despite ample evidence that young people today are very different from the Baby Boomers. The following is an incomplete listing of the differences between today's young and the Boomers. Even so, it demonstrates the need for political scientists to return to original research on young people and politics. (I eschew citations, for most of this information is well-known.)

First, most Baby Boomers were reared in two-parent households. Dad worked; mom stayed at home and cared for the kids. More of the young today come from divorced families or single-parent homes. Even in two-parent households, if both parents work, "latch-key" kids have to fend for themselves after school.

Most of the Boomers' families ate together, and generally households had only one or two television sets. Today, families seldom eat at the same time. Kids now have entertainment centers in their rooms.

The Baby Boomers' media environment was largely limited to newspapers, news-magazines, and the three major TV networks. Young people today have a much more variegated media environment: cable TV, the Internet, the Blogosphere, and other technologically-based communication media. The DotNets are also more likely to pay attention to "soft" news, i.e., stories about sports, entertainment, and crime, than they are to follow media accounts of political news (Bennett, Rhine, & Flickinger, 2007).

As long as they were in high school or college/university, Boomers who had jobs were students who worked. Today, colleges/ universities have workers who student. (I doubt I have to tell faculty what that means.) The time-honored tradition that one

matriculated through college/university in four or five years is now the exception, not the norm.

When Boomers were of college age, men were more likely than women to attend. Today, institutions of higher learning have student bodies that are disproportionately female (60 percent or more vs. 40 percent or less).

Young people today manifest very different patterns of peer-group behavior, "courtship," and so on. Boomers, for example, "dated" in the 1960s; today, some of the DotNets "hook up."

We also know that young people today are reluctant to identify with one of the major political parties, and Independents behave very differently than those who identify with a political party.

Finally, Wendy Rahn (1998) reported that a sizable minority of young people do not identify with the American political community. The 2004 American National Election Study reinforces her findings. When asked "how important is being an American," the DotNets were less likely than older birth cohorts to say "extremely important," and more likely to reply "not at all important." The same pattern pertained when the ANES asked "how does seeing the flag make you feel" and "how strong is your love for the country?"

In 1981, Paul Sniderman published *A Question of Loyalty,* which focused on those who were alienated from the American political system. He found that even the most alienated among them still identified themselves as Americans. As he put it, "[a] sense of belonging [to America] suffuses the sentiments of citizens, even if they are alienated" (Sniderman, 1981, p. 124).

These are just the tip of the iceberg when it comes to comparing Baby Boomers with the DotNets. These observations should suffice to explain why political scientists are remiss to neglect studying young people and politics.

Almond and Verba (1963) pointed out that patterns in family life, schooling, and even work, have potentially important consequences for the development of politically relevant dispositions.

Today's young have different family lives, educational experiences, and work-lives, but we have only the foggiest notions of what these changes mean for political dispositions and behaviors. The DotNets are sufficiently different from the best-studied birth cohort (the Baby Boomers) to warrant renewed attention.

One can readily document young people's profound and on-going disconnection from politics, which has palpable consequences for democracy. When it comes to political interest, most forms of conventional

political participation, exposure to news media, and information about politics, young people's performance today is much "worse" than older Americans', if we take traditional notions of democratic citizenship as the standard for judging these matters.

It would be bootless to call for or expect a restoration of the macro-level orientation of political socialization research dominant during the 1960s. Too many factors, not the least being problems with that genré of research as well as changes within the discipline, militate against such a restoration.

Nevertheless, enough has changed in American families, educational institutions, entertainment and news media, work-life, peer-group relationships, and so on, to merit renewed research on today's youth. By focusing on macro-level issues, we need not give short shrift to micro-level analyses of how people learn about politics. According to Sapiro, macro- and micro-level approaches "are complementary… " (2004, p. 3).

Scholars are aware of young people's political indifference, of course, and strategies to ameliorate it have been proposed (see, e.g., Battistone & Hudson, Eds., 1997; Mann & Patrick, Eds., 2000). University-based facilities, such as the University of Maryland's Center for Information & Research on Civic Learning & Engagement (CIRCLE), do good work. Nevertheless, an over-arching comprehension of political socialization today needs to guide efforts to ameliorate young people's political disconnection.

Renewed research on macro-level facets of political socialization could provide clues about the reasons for young people's tendency to eschew traditional political processes. Unless we find some way to reconnect the young and conventional politics, the future of the American experiment with democracy may be very bleak.

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NOTES

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[2] Some contend that although young people eschew conventional political activities—such as voting in elections—they out-perform older birth cohorts in voluntary activities (see, e.g., Dalton, 2006; Zukin, Keeter, Andolina, Jenkins, & Delli Carpini, 2006). Even if true, so long as American society settles collective problems through traditional political

processes, youthful indifference to conventional politics is worrisome.

[3] Two caveats are in order. First, idealization of political authorities was not universal. Children from Mexican-American, African American, and white Appalachian backgrounds held jaundiced views of authority figures (see, e.g., Garcia, 1973; Greenberg, 1970b; Jaros, Hirsch, & Fleron, 1968). Second, other than Blacks (Marvick, 1965), adult Americans also had positive views of the political system and political authorities in the late 1950s and early 1960s (see, e.g., Almond & Verba, 1963; Lane, 1962).

[4] Many political scientists tended to be favorably disposed toward the American political system in the early 1960s. Examples include Gabriel Almond and Sidney Verba's *The Civic Culture* (1963), Robert Dahl's *Who Governs?* (1961), and Robert Lane's article in *The American Political Science Review* (1965).

[5] Many of the protesters in the late 1960s and 1970s were probably not the same individuals who had seemed to hold such positive attitudes about the American political system and political authorities a decade or so earlier.

[6] By 2007, the University of Wisconsin at Milwaukee's Political Science Department no longer lists a graduate-level course on Political Socialization.

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